

# PHENOMENAL WOMAN

Four Poems Celebrating Women

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Maya Angelou



R A N D O M   H O U S E

*Maya Angelou*

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*Four Poems Celebrating Women*



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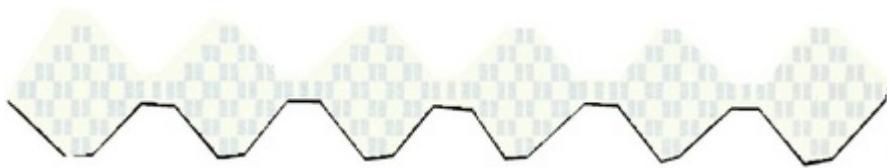
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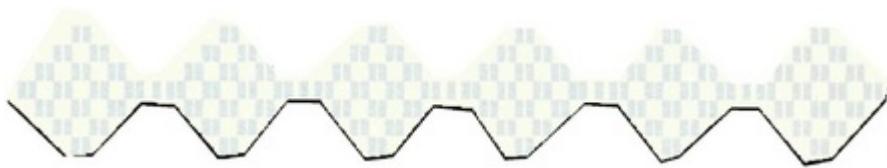
## PHENOMENAL WOMAN

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms,  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them,  
They say they still can't see.  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing,  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
The palm of my hand,  
The need for my care.  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.



## STILL I RISE

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

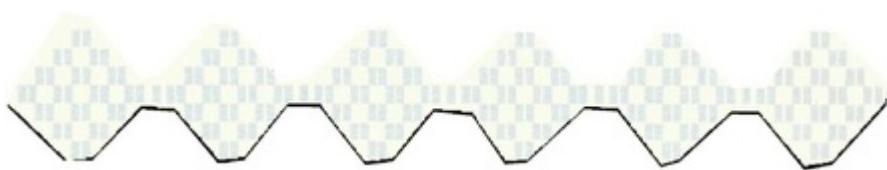
You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.



## WEEKEND GLORY

Some dichty folks  
don't know the facts,  
posin' and preenin'  
and puttin' on acts,  
stretchin' their necks  
and strainin' their backs.

They move into condos  
up over the ranks,  
pawn their souls  
to the local banks.  
Buyin' big cars  
they can't afford,  
ridin' around town  
actin' bored.

If they want to learn how to live life right,  
they ought to study me on Saturday night.

My job at the plant  
ain't the biggest bet,  
but I pay my bills  
and stay out of debt.  
I get my hair done  
for my own self's sake,  
so I don't have to pick  
and I don't have to rake.

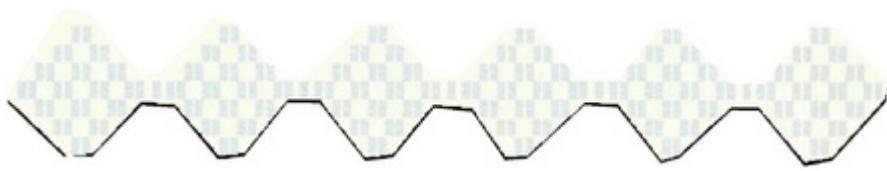
Take the church money out  
and head cross town

to my friend girl's house  
where we plan our round.  
We meet our men and go to a joint  
where the music is blues  
and to the point.

Folks write about me.  
They just can't see  
how I work all week  
at the factory.  
Then get spruced up  
and laugh and dance  
And turn away from worry  
with sassy glance.

They accuse me of livin'  
from day to day,  
but who are they kiddin'?  
So are they.

My life ain't heaven  
but it sure ain't hell.  
I'm not on top  
but I call it swell  
if I'm able to work  
and get paid right  
and have the luck to be Black  
on a Saturday night.



## OUR GRANDMOTHERS

She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,  
the canebrake rustling  
with the whispers of leaves, and  
loud longing of hounds and  
the ransack of hunters crackling the near  
branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward  
freedom,  
I shall not, I shall not be moved.

She gathered her babies,  
their tears slick as oil on black faces,  
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.  
Momma, is Master going to sell you  
from us tomorrow?

Yes.  
Unless you keep walking more  
and talking less.  
Yes.  
Unless the keeper of our lives  
releases me from all commandments.  
Yes.  
And your lives,  
never mine to live,  
will be executed upon the killing floor of  
innocents.  
Unless you match my heart and words,  
saying with me,

I shall not be moved.

In Virginia tobacco fields,  
leaning into the curve  
of Steinway  
pianos, along Arkansas roads,  
in the red hills of Georgia,  
into the palms of her chained hands, she  
cried against calamity,  
You have tried to destroy me  
and though I perish daily,

I shall not be moved.

Her universe, often  
summarized into one black body  
falling finally from the tree to her feet,  
made her cry each time in a new voice.  
All my past hastens to defeat,  
and strangers claim the glory of my love,  
Iniquity has bound me to his bed,

yet, I must not be moved.

She heard the names,  
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:  
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,  
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,  
whore, hot tail, thing, it.  
She said, But my description cannot  
fit your tongue, for  
I have a certain way of being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

No angel stretched protecting wings  
above the heads of her children,  
fluttering and urging the winds of reason  
into the confusion of their lives.

They sprouted like young weeds,  
but she could not shield their growth  
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor  
shape them into symbolic topiaries.  
She sent them away,  
underground, overland, in coaches and  
shoeless.

When you learn, teach.

When you get, give.

As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.  
She searched God's face.  
Assured,  
she placed her fire of service  
on the altar, and though  
clothed in the finery of faith,  
when she appeared at the temple door,  
no sign welcomed  
Black Grandmother. Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,  
into wickedness, she cried,  
No one, no, nor no one million  
ones dare deny me God. I go forth  
alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right  
impels me to pull forever  
at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my  
feet without ceasing into the camp of the  
righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,

honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted  
down a pyramid of years.

She is Sheba and Sojourner,  
Harriet and Zora,  
Mary Bethune and Angela,  
Annie to Zenobia.

She stands  
before the abortion clinic,  
confounded by the lack of choices.  
In the Welfare line,  
reduced to the pity of handouts.  
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded  
by the mysteries.  
In the operating room,  
husbanding life.  
In the choir loft,  
holding God in her throat.  
On lonely street corners,  
hawking her body.  
In the classroom, loving the  
children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,  
she sings to her loves and beloveds,  
to her foes and detractors:  
However I am perceived and deceived,  
however my ignorance and conceits,  
lay aside your fears that I will be undone,  
  
for I shall not be moved.

*I dedicate this book  
to the memory of my mother,  
Vivian Baxter,  
the most phenomenal.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAYA ANGELOU has written five volumes of autobiography, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She has also published five collections of poetry: *And Still I Rise; Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie; Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well; Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?; and I Shall Not Be Moved*; as well as *On the Pulse of Morning*, the poem she read at the inauguration of President Clinton. All of her poetry has been brought together in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*.